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## RAPA NUI: A HYPERBOLIC ICONOGRAPHY

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Places are readily represented, understood, and marketed through the use of capsule images (Porteous 1977) or icons. The Eiffel Tower means Paris; the shell-like image of the Opera House means Sydney. Such large vertical objects, hyperbolic in their exaggerated obviousness, make useful icons. In this paper I explore the iconography of Rapa Nui, which is rather more complicated than the image which immediately springs to mind, the icon of the stern and severe moai which decorates so many book-covers, film titles, tee-shirts and placemats.

### ICONOGRAPHY

Iconography concerns the visual images or symbols that are used to represent a person, place or thing. An icon is an object regarded as representative of something. An icon may be a person (Darwin), an idea (evolution), a nonhuman creature (Galapagos finches) or a place (the Galapagos Islands); together these interreferential icons make up a complex iconic system. On first consideration, such an iconic system for Rapa Nui might well include ideas such as mystery and remoteness, objects such as the moai, and persons such as Thor Heyerdahl. A moai would seem to be the perfect Rapa Nui icon, because: it is a large vertical object with human features which projects an aura of power; it combines the object with the general ideas of remoteness (spatially, temporally, and in demeanor) and mystery (all the problems of who built the moai, how they were transported, and where the builders originated); and because it is associated with romantic adventure in the person of Thor Heyerdahl, who began serious excavation and promoted Rapa Nui to the waiting world. The moai are hyperbolic in their very nature, being both larger than life and sterner than life. They seem like Freudian superegos, projecting their powerful gaze across the supine island.

### LONGITUDINAL SURVEY

In order to investigate the above speculations, I performed a longitudinal survey of public perceptions of Rapa Nui. In 1978 I asked a geography class at the University of Victoria,

British Columbia: "What three items spring to mind when you think of Easter Island? Please answer within two minutes." Twenty-five years later, in September 2003, I repeated the exercise. In both cases almost all respondents were Caucasian, in their early twenties, split about equally in gender, and in the last two years of a major in geography or a cognate discipline. In 1978 there were 44 respondents, providing a maximum of 132 possible responses, whereas in 2003 there were 47 respondents giving a maximum of 141 possible responses. The

Table 1. Survey responses (%)

Category	1978	2003
Know nothing at all	33	21
Know the location	11	6
Archaeological Complex	36	24
Environmental Complex	0	19
"Tropical paradise"	7	1
Totals	87%	71%

chief problem in content analyzing such material is to determine coherent and meaningful categories. After much consideration, I decided upon the categories laid out in Table 1.

Those who knew nothing said so, left blanks, or provided cute statements on Easter bunny themes. Knowing the location includes mention of the South Pacific, Polynesia (rare), or Chile. The ignorance of a minority of guessers is seen in the "tropical paradise" theme, which in 1978 imagined Easter Island with luxuriant vegetation, a hot climate, and wonderful beaches. That this theme had almost disappeared by 2003 reflects the change in importance of the archaeological and environmental themes over the 25-year period.

The traditional Archaeological Complex of themes includes mention of the moai, other artefacts, mystery and remoteness, archaeological research, Heyerdahl, Mulloy, and aku-aku. Accounting for 24% of all responses in 1978 and 18% in 2003, the moai dominated the complex. In contrast, the Environmental Complex, non-existent in 1978, contains references to environmental degradation, resource overexplo-

tation, trees, deforestation, starvation, and cultural collapse. On this basis one might readily assign the 1978 concentration on archaeology and mystery to the influence of Heyerdahl (1958) in the 1950s and 1960s, and the more recent emphasis on environmental disaster to popularization of Bahn and Flenley's (1992) depiction of the island as a microcosmic exemplar of the future fate of the earth, readily teachable in first-year university courses.

Amusing one-off references in 1978 included Captain Cook, Chariots of the Gods, Darwin, and Mutiny on the Bounty. In 2003 appeared Africa, aliens, cannibalism, and "that TV commercial for stuffy noses." To my chagrin (Porteous 1981) there were only a very few 2003 references to

Table 2. First answer only (%)

Category	1978	2003
Moai	41	36
Nothing	14	19
Pacific Ocean	11	4
Thor Heyerdahl	7	0
Environmental/ cultural disaster	0	6
"An island"	0	4
"Rocks"	2	4
Totals	75%	73%

colonization, grassland, sheep, or the tourist industry. There were more references to "rocks."

In sum, the 1978 viewpoint was either ignorant (33% knew nothing) or narrowly focussed on archaeology (*moai* 24%, Heyerdahl 5% of all responses). In contrast, the 2003 image was less ignorant but more diffuse, with the environmental issues beginning to rival the archaeological. By 2003 Heyerdahl has disappeared, and there is a single reference to "Bauen and Fallow" (a misheard Bahn and Flenley).

A focus on the first answer given on each survey sheet permits some fine-tuning of the Rapa Nui image among Canadian geography undergraduates (Table 2). Yes, Virgil and Virginia, Easter Island is very likely to be an island with rocks. Both tables suggest that by 2003 students were more hazy about location, an increasingly common but amazing failing among postmodern geographers (of course, they could have been so sure of its location that it wasn't worth mentioning). The single most striking feature of Table 2 is the persistence of the *moai* as first-answer response to the stimulus "Easter Island." It is worth noting here that no students in 1978 and less than 5% in 2003 provided the name Rapa Nui in any spelling. Similarly, not a single person used the word *moai*, preferring to refer to statues, stone heads, headstones, stone monuments, figureheads, long heads, sculptures, big heads, monoliths, and stone faces (most evocative!). The most frequent words used to refer to the *moai* were "heads," "stone" and "gigantic," the latter offering some support for the notion of hyperbole. It's pretty clear from this survey, then, that the *moai* continue to be the favorite public icon of Rapa Nui.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

The discerning reader will already have come up with ways to extend this initial exploration of the representation of Rapa Nui. The literary historian, for example, might well attempt to trace in detail the influence on our image of the island of: (a) the popular books of Bienvenido de Estella (1920) and Routledge (1919); (b) both the scientific and the popular work of Heyerdahl in the 1950s; (c) the seminal work of Flenley and collaborators in the 1980s; and (d) the rash of documentaries, some excellent, others chiefly about archaeologists bickering, that began in the 1990s. Even Kevin Costner's influence, if any, could be appraised. Similarly, an art historian might trace the spread of *moai* iconography throughout the world, paying particular attention to the *moai* reproductions so assiduously recorded in the "Moai Sightings" section of the *Rapa Nui Journal*. Specialists in tourism could trace the provenance and potency of the images that entice visitors to the island. Mythologists could investigate the nuances of the popular "Secrets of Lost Empires" approach to Rapa Nui. Anthropological psychiatrists might be interested in the meanings conveyed to observers by the gaze of the *moai*. Interpretative feminists, postmodernists, critical theorists and postcolonialists could all get a good workout via the *moai* icon theme.

It has taken me a long time to get to this point and I won't be repeating this project in 2028. The possible extensions of this small study are legion. My own preference for further research would be an investigation of how far the *moai* icon has reached a larger audience than academics and island aficionados through being used as an image in English, Spanish and other literature. Just pulling a few books off my own shelves demonstrates that the *moai* had certainly appeared in Chilean literature by the time of Pablo Neruda and Isabel Allende, whilst in English there seems to have been an outburst of Easter Island references initiated first by the accession of *moai* by the British Museum in the 1850s and again after the 1950s popularizations by Heyerdahl. Dickens, in *Little Dorrit* (1967: 67) speaks of "ugly South Sea gods" as early as 1857, while Barbara Pym (1955:88), who worked for an anthropological journal, pictured one of her protagonists as: "So tall and rugged, and that hewn face with its grim expression reminds me of those images from Easter Island, once seen in the British Museum." William Golding's (1959:170) child protagonist sees adults as "remote and august as images from Easter Island." In the United States *moai* imagery has been used in novels, travel books, cartoons, and advertisements. Were it not for the absurd costs of reproduction, one could well write an article on the changing representation of the *moai* in the *New Yorker* and a variety of other cartoon genres.

## NOT SO MUCH A CONCLUSION, MORE AN INVITATION TO FURTHER EXPLORATION OF CULTURAL THEMES

The tentative conclusions of my small longitudinal study are: (a) that a sizeable proportion of Canadian undergraduate geographers knows nothing at all about Rapa Nui; (b) that the single emphasis of 1978 on archaeological themes had been challenged in 2003 by a new concentration on the theme of environmental and cultural destruction; (c) that the *moai* continue to be the foremost Rapa Nui icon; and (d) that the dou-

ble emphasis on first, the gigantism of the *moai*, and second, the theme of island environmental destruction which presages worldwide ecocatastrophe, suggests a strong element of hyperbole in the iconic representation of Rapa Nui to the English-speaking world. It goes without saying that the present inhabitants are totally absent from the Rapa Nui iconic system as currently established.

My second conclusion is really a beginning. I'd like to see the growth of a cultural approach to Rapa Nui Studies that emphasizes both the history of the island and the place of the island in the world, here and now. There are a dozen graduate theses to be done in this field. Over 20 years ago I suggested that "the single-minded pursuit of Easter Island prehistory has resulted in an almost total neglect of the island's modern development" (Porteous 1981:v). Happily, more research is now being done on Rapa Nui history, environment, development and planning. Cultural studies approaches could be the next frontier.

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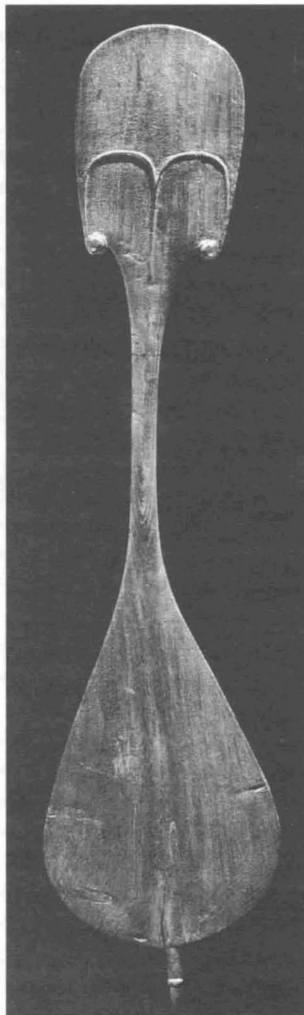
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## WHAT'S NEW IN MAASTRICHT, the NETHERLANDS

By Herbert von Saher

EVERY YEAR YOUR PERIPATETIC CORRESPONDENT in the Netherlands makes a trip to the city of Maastricht in the Southern tip of the country. In this city of Roman origin, The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) is organized annually. In a period of little over a decade this fair has become the most important art fair in the world: 80% of all great master paintings that are for sale are being offered there. At 261 stands, antique dealers from all over the world offer their treasures. I always get a tremendous kick out of my visits to this fair. One could imagine that an art museum of the greatest importance is being opened and after ten days the paintings, sculptures, furniture and jewels, always from private collections that are normally not on view, disappear again. Everything is for sale, if you have the money to buy. It is a sensation.

The fair for 2004 lasted for two days and I made my rounds until I was completely exhausted. On the stand of Galerie Meyer-Oceanic Art, 17 Rue des Beaux Arts, 75006 Paris a beautiful Rapa Nui ceremonial paddle was on sale. It is described as follows: "Rapa, Ceremonial Dance Paddle from Rapa Nui. 1640 to 1820 (Carbon 14) Toromiro wood, 88.4 x 20.9 x 1.5 cm. Provenance: André Breton, 42 Rue Fontaine, 75009 Paris, No 6144 of the André Brton auction, 2003."



This sculpture is accompanied by the French "*certificat pour un bien culturel*".

As for its exhibition history and literature reference: "La Révolution Surréaliste, Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou, 2002, Paris; catalogue: Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Georges Pompidou, 2002, pp 310/311. 'Surrealismus', 1914-1944, K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, 2002, Düsseldorf."

"An extremely rare ceremonial dance paddle, or *rapa* representing a highly stylized male figure in the form of a double blade paddle. The Janus face on the upper blade is represented by a twin arch forming the eyes and meeting in the center to form a nasal ridge. The extremities of the arches are decorated with large round ear ornaments. The lower blade, larger and more sensual in form, ends with a phallic finial showing the retracted foreskin. The slight curvature of this *rapa* gives it an elegance that is not found in the straight paddles. The anthropomorphic representation is perhaps that of MAKEMAKE, an important god figure in the local pantheon. The central section of the shaft shows distinct wear and signs of usage and age. The penile finial is blunted and dented from the repeated ritual striking of the paddle against the ground or the altar."

The asking price for this paddle is Euro 250.000, (equivalent to US\$ 312.500) which shows that it is a real collector's item.....